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ABSTRACT

A study attempted to delineate the parameters of practice that are referred to as literature-based reading instruction and explored the perspectives of the teacher, the students, and the researcher about the use of literature in three different literature-based classrooms. Six teachers (third grade or above) were identified, teachers who were highly respected within their systems, had a number of years of teaching experience, and used literature as the basis for their reading programs. Three of the teachers were part of the field testing of interviews, surveys, videotaping, and document data collection, data analysis, and pattern confirmation. The other three teachers' classrooms became the sites for more intensive observation, interviewing, and analysis. Results indicated that three anchoring points existed on the spectrum of classroom practice in literature-based instruction: (1) literature used as the text in a basal curriculum; (2) literature as the basis for an individualized reading program; and (3) literature as the key to integrating the curriculum throughout the day. Results also indicated that students took on the language of the teacher and seemed to move toward the teacher's perception of what was occurring in the room. Findings suggest that it was the power, control, and autonomy the teachers sensed they had that freed them to use literature--and to differ widely from each other in their use of literature. (RS)

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LITERATURE BASED CLASSROOMS: THREE PERSPECTIVES

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LITERATURE BASED CLASSROOMS: THREE PERSPECTIVES

"We are doing whole language in everything but reading." a school administrator told me as I was discussing my research interests and how we might work together. This was particularly disconcerting to me as he had just told me that there would be no problem hooking up with a "literature-based" teacher. I assumed that must mean a teacher who used literature as the core of her curriculum, yet did not use holistic methods--almost a paradox, in my book.

The use of children's literature has become increasingly widespread in reading programs in the last five years (Hickman & Cullinan, 1989; Routman, 1988; Hancock & Hill, 1987; Short, 1985). This incident made it quite clear to me that the term "literature based reading" has been used to describe a wide variety of practices. How are teachers implementing the use of literature? How have research findings on contextualized language and literature been incorporated into classroom practice?

The goal of this study was not to provide a precise definition of or prescription for classrooms which use literature as the core of the reading curriculum. Rather, the first goal was to attempt to delineate the parameters of practice that are referred to as literature-based reading instruction. When I say literature based reading I mean any program that uses literature as the core of the reading curriculum.

The second goal was to explore the perspectives of the teacher, the students, and an outsider--me--about the use of literature in three different literature-based classrooms. Why was I interested in these perspectives? I was intrigued by Smith and Feathers (1983) study which found that when using literature in social studies teachers were convinced they were teaching "citizenship, responsibility, decision-making, and general knowledge." When interviewed, students said they were to learn "facts, dates, the presidents, and the language and culture of China."

This shift from higher level cognitive skills teaching to factual information learning seems to take place in the translation from theory to practice. While teachers think they are teaching higher level skills, the activities of the classroom emphasize learning facts. It seemed to me this might occur when teaching reading from a literature base as well. Do teachers think they are teaching main idea, synthesis, and analysis when the students think they are to be learning prefixes, adjectival endings, or the long a sound? By exploring instruction from the student's perspective, the teacher's perspective, and my own, I hoped to examine whether this mismatch from teaching to learning occurred in reading as well.

Methods

During the summer of 1989 I talked with numerous teachers, administrators, and professors to identify teachers that were highly respected within their systems, had a number of years of teaching experience, and used literature as the basis for their reading programs. I established four criteria that I felt were necessary for classrooms in this study:

1) The class is taught by a teacher who has received high recommendations from the principal and colleagues for her teaching ability. (I use she here as all those recommended were women.)

2) The teacher incorporates literature as an integral part of the reading program.

3) The students are third grade or above so that the children are better able to articulate what they are doing in reading and why they think they are doing it.

4) The classroom has been using literature as the basis for the reading program for at least three years.

Zarillo, in his 1989 descriptive study of literature based classrooms, defines literature based instruction as "instructional practices and student activities using novels, informational books, short stories, plays, and poems." He discusses two criteria for literature based reading programs: 1) The literature is not rewritten for instructional purposes, and 2) The literature supplants, not supplements the basal. These definitions were appropriate to my classrooms as well.

By August I had narrowed the list to six teachers. Three of these teachers were a part of the field testing of interviews, surveys, videotaping, and document data collection, data analysis, and pattern confirmation. The other three classrooms, which spanned two states and a 250 mile radius, became the sites for more intensive observation, interviewing and analysis.

In September I made initial visits to all three classrooms to interview teachers, select four focal students from each classroom, observe the classroom for two days, and make arrangements for the rest of the school year. In October I began the first of five week-long visits to each room. During each visit I would interview the teacher, interview the focal students, collect documents, and keep field notes. If I videotaped during the visit I showed the students the videotape later in the day or the next day and asked them to tell me what they were thinking, what they were doing, and why they thought they were doing it.

After a week in a school I took a week to type field notes, read transcribed interviews, and organize the documents I had collected. As it took me six weeks to complete one round of visits, I wrote dialogue letters to the focal students in each room, to find out what they were reading and thinking about while I was unable to be in their room.

Glaser & Straus (1967) constant comparative method was used in the analysis of the data. As new data were collected, hypotheses were refined and the questions took on new meaning. Data from the interviews were triangulated with information from the documents and field notes. Content analysis procedures were used on transcriptions of interviews which were coded. Patterns which I saw emerging from the data were presented to the teacher and students in the interview following the visit to check for an accurate representation of the room.

The final visits occurred in late April and May. The vignette of the classroom and the analysis of the data was then given back to the teacher for her perusal and comment. While the language and interpretation of events in each of these vignettes was clearly my own, I wanted them to accurately reflect what the teacher thought was occurring as well.

Analyses - What did I find?

Spectrum of Practice

Indeed in this study, I found a wide spectrum of practices in these literature based classrooms. There were also a number of elements that were similar across classrooms. I will speak to the similarities and then the distinctive features of each of the rooms.

All of the teachers in this study:

1. are seen as innovators and risk-takers in their school districts.

2. say they feel they have autonomy. They are trusted by their principals to make wise decisions.

3. are suspicious of test scores and "the system's" way of determining student ability. They do their own assessment and evaluation rather than trusting any one else's.

4. encourage students to take a critical stance toward reading.

5. respect students as knowledgeable learners.

6. are direct with students about reading, ability, and behavior. They talk with students as mature people, responsible for their actions and choices. They do not couch language in euphemisms or sweetness. (A hypothesis--did not want to spend time on discipline)

7. are looked to by others in their schools and districts for advice. Others in the school have often adapted elements of their reading programs.

8. affiliate with professional groups, take courses, go to national conferences, and enjoy reading current research.

9. have a personal love of literature.

10. read aloud daily to their class.

Each classroom had distinctive elements to the use of literature in the reading program. Stated most broadly, the six classrooms fell into one of three categories: literature used as if it were in a basal reading program, literature as the basis of an individualized reading program, and literature as the key to integrating the curriculum throughout the day. Each of these categories were represented by one of the classrooms I studied more intensively.

The classrooms could be observed in a number of different ways. Each of these lenses provided a different view of what was occurring and what was distinctive about the classrooms. Fifteen of these glimpses are included on the transparency. This transparency plots each classroom. This clarifies some of the distinguishing characteristics of the rooms--indeed it plots a number of anchor pins in each teacher's philosophy of teaching reading.

I also found it helpful to "distill" some of the features of the room to a few words to capture the essence of what I saw occurring. A few words can never do justice to the complexity of a classroom, but distilling the stacks of data I collected to a number of words clarifies some of the distinguishing elements of these classrooms. There were five aspects of the rooms I felt were made clearer by this process of distillation.

1. Pattern of time organization in room.

Ziff - components of program determine time allotment.

Rogers - subject area determines time periods.

Kauffman - Integration between and among subject areas.

2. The role of the teacher.

Ziff - coordinator / choreographer

Rogers - instructor

Kauffman - collaborator / facilitator / resource

3. The role of group discussions.

Ziff - check reading comprehension, answer questions from written assignments, discuss author's language, style, and questions about the content of the reading.

Rogers - check reading comprehension, check assignments, relate text to personal experience, discuss reading skills.

Kauffman - explore ideas, share writing or thoughts about reading, push others to think and stretch your own thinking.

4. What happens to the lower end of the spectrum?

Ziff - they get lost

Rogers - the class goes the speed of those at the lower end of the spectrum.

Kauffman - there is a different definition of the lower end of the spectrum. All students help each other in some areas and receive help in others.

5. Reasons for becoming a good reader.

Ziff - read for an enjoyable aesthetic experience.

Rogers - read because it is good (for you?).

Kauffman - read to learn.

Perceptions

The second goal of the study was to document the teacher's and student's perceptions of what was occuring in the room and what was important about reading. Many of the students had not been in a literature based classroom before. Because of this the student's views of how reading was conducted, the role of reading, and what was important about reading shifted over the course of the year.

At the beginning of the year student's tended to reflect one of two things in their statements: ideas about reading based on their experience from the year before

[QUOTE]

or ideas about reading built on a unique aspect of the program [QUOTE].

As the year progressed students did use the language of the teacher with increased frequency when talking about reading.

[QUOTE]

This did not always reflect what students said was most important about reading. Students responses and perceptions seemed to follow a pattern. The more the teacher's reading program varied from the norm in the school (Carmack the most, then Lentz, then Rohrer), the more explicit the teacher was about what she wanted the students to be learning, what she felt the purpose of reading was, and why they were using literature as the basis for the reading program.

The more explicit the teacher was, the more the student's perceptions matched the teacher's perception of what was occurring in the room--and the more the teacher's practice seemed to match the teacher's state intentions. This matches the finding of other researchers (Edwards, 1962; Weintraub & Denny, 1966; Downing, 1969; Johns, 1972; Johns & Ellis, 1976) who say that the clearer the teacher is about her purpose the more likely students are to have perceptions of what is important and what is occurring in the classroom that match the teacher's.

Summary

So -- each of these teachers has chosen to break away from the norm in her school of teaching reading with the help of the basal reader. Within this deviation from the norm there is a broad spectrum of practice of literature based instruction. Three anchoring points on the spectrum appear to be literature used as the text in a basal curriculum, literature as the basis for an individualized reading program, and literature as the key to integrating the curriculum throughout the day.

Students do take on the language of the teacher and seem to move toward the teacher's perceptions of what is occuring in the room. The more explicit the teacher is about her intentions, the more likely the student's perception of the important aspects of reading is to match the teacher's.

What became clear in the analysis of these data was that what bound these rooms together went deeper than their use of literature as the core of the reading curriculum. It seemed that it was the power, control, and autonomy the teachers sensed they had that freed them to use literature--and to differ widely from each other in their use of literature. Because the teachers felt autonomous, they were free to try to shape their reading program into what they felt was important--and in this case it was literature.

This is in stark contrast to what seems to happen in many basal classrooms. According to Durkin (and) teachers tend to defer to outside authorities and feel like they are not in control of the curriculum. The teachers in these classrooms were in control, and did not tend to defer to outside authorities. While I embarked on this study to document what occured in classrooms where literature was a key feature, I have concluded that literature is not the only distinguishing feature, but one that co-occurs with features of ownership and autonomy in these classrooms.